Argumentativeness, Avoidance, Verbal Aggressiveness, and Verbal Benevolence as Predictors of Partner Perceptions of an Individual's Conflict Style

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Abstract

This study addressed two main questions. First, are the traits of argumentativeness, verbal aggressiveness, avoidance, and verbal benevolence reflected in conflict styles such that they are perceived by others? Second, how do these traits predict the five conflict styles in the dual concern model? These questions were tested using dyadic data from a simulated downsizing activity. Results showed that participants perceived their partners differently depending on the traits their partners endorsed. For example, people who reported being avoidant or verbally aggressive were less likely to be perceived as using the compromising style. Overall, the results suggested that the four traits investigated in this study are likely to be associated with observable behavior. Findings also demonstrated that these traits help differentiate the five conflict styles in more nuanced ways than predicted by the dual concern model. Finally, the results supported the idea that conflict styles are not only shaped by one's own traits but also by the traits of others and the interaction between two people's traits.

For over three decades, research has accumulated on the concepts of argumentativeness (Infante & Rancer, 1982) and verbal aggressiveness (Infante & Wigley, 1986) as well as the dual concern model of conflict (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986). Questions remain regarding the intersection of these variables. One such question addresses the extent to which traits such as argumentativeness, verbal aggressiveness, avoidance, and verbal benevolence are reflected in conflict styles and perceived by others. Argumentativeness is a generally stable trait that predisposes people to advocate positions on controversial issues and verbally challenge the positions others take on those issues (Infante & Rancer, 1982). Verbal aggressiveness is a behavioral predisposition toward attacking the self-concepts of opponents (Infante & Wigley, 1986). Avoidance refers to the tendency to avoid engaging in argument (Hamilton & Hample, 2011), and verbal benevolence refers to the tendency to validate and support others during arguments (Kotowski, Levine, Baker, & Bolt, 2009).

There is a lack of research showing that these traits "are associated with observations of relevant behaviors" (Kotowski et al., 2009, p. 444), including conflict styles (Rogan & La France, 2003). Kotowski

et al. found that trait measures of argumentativeness, verbal aggressiveness, and verbal benevolence were correlated with the types of messages people generated during a written task but were uncorrelated with the behaviors people actually used during interaction. Therefore, they argued that these constructs might reflect attitudes or motivations rather than behavioral tendencies. However, Infante, Rancer, and Wigley (2011) provided evidence suggesting that these traits are manifest in behaviors. The present study adds to this debate by determining whether the extent to which people possess traits such as argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness is related to how others view their conflict style. If it is, this would suggest that these traits translate into observable behavior, as Infante and his colleagues contended.

Another question addresses the extent to which the traits of argumentativeness, verbal aggressiveness, avoidance, and verbal benevolence underlie the five conflict styles in the dual concern model. A conflict style is the way a person most commonly deals with conflict (Pruitt & Carnevale, 1993). The five styles in the dual concern model—integrating, obliging, compromising, dominating, and avoiding—are theorized to be differentiated by the extent to which people are concerned about their own goals (and are, therefore, assertive rather than passive) as well as the extent to which people are concerned about their partner's goals (and are, therefore, cooperative rather than competitive; Pruitt & Carnevale, 1993). Although the goals people have during conflict are highly situational, traits may predispose people to engage in certain conflict behaviors more than others. The traits of argumentativeness and avoidance are conceptually similar to the dimensions of assertiveness and passiveness that are theorized to underlie conflict styles, whereas the traits of verbal aggressiveness and verbal benevolence are conceptually similar to the traits of competitiveness versus cooperativeness. Research has also suggested that the five conflict styles may be highly multidimensional, such that they are distinguished by more dimensions than originally thought (Cai & Fink, 2002). Traits related to argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness may be part of this multidimensional landscape such that different combinations of these traits associate with each conflict style.

The present study, therefore, addresses two key questions. First, do partners perceive an individual's conflict style differently depending on the traits (i.e., argumentativeness, verbal aggressiveness, avoidance, and verbal benevolence) that an individual possesses? Second, are the five conflict styles in the dual concern model associated with different combinations of traits? The answers to these questions are conceptually and practically important. At a conceptual level, if these traits are not observable to partners, then, as Kotowski et al. (2009) suggested, they should not be defined as behavioral predispositions. This conceptual shift would signal a change in the types of research that should be conducted on argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness, with more research needed to understand how people process rather than perform arguments as a result of possessing these traits. At a practical level, if traits such as argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness are not observable in behavior, then these traits are much less likely to impact how people engage in and ultimately manage conflict.

In terms of the dual concern model, this study could help explicate how traits are associated with conflict styles. People enter conflict situations with behavioral predispositions that steer them toward using particular styles; however, situational and relational variables also affect the conflict behavior that people ultimately use. This study will help determine the extent to which certain traits are predictive of perceptions of conflict style. In addition, work on the dual concern model has focused on how two dimensions —concern for self (assertive vs. passive) and concern for other (cooperative vs. competitive)—underlie conflict styles. Within this model, you cannot have high and low concern for self. However, the traits examined in the present study are seen as related yet independent, so people can be high in both verbal benevolence (i.e., they validate others sometimes) and verbal aggressiveness (i.e., they attack others sometimes). Thus, this study may show that multiple traits are associated with each conflict style, which would support Cai and Fink's (2002) contention that the conflict styles in the dual concern model may be more multidimensional than originally thought.

To answer these questions in a comprehensive manner that also adds to the existing literature, dyadic data were utilized. In this study, actor effects represent the extent to which an actor's score on a trait measure (e.g., argumentativeness) is associated with the partner's rating of the actor's conflict style
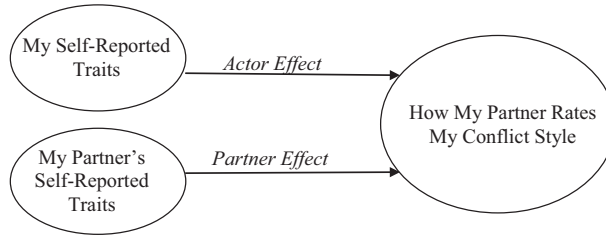
Figure 1. Pictorial representation of actor and partner effects in this study.

(e.g., the integrating style; see Figure 1). For example, actors who are predisposed to be verbally aggressive may be especially likely to be perceived as dominant by their partners. Thus, actor effects show that traits are reflected in the perceptions that other people have of a person's behavior. This is what would be predicted by the dual concern model, since this model focuses on how an individual's goals impact their conflict style, which would presumably be observable to others. A dyadic data analysis also allows an examination of partner effects. In this case, partner effects represent how a person's traits are associated with how she or he perceives a partner's behavior during conflict (see Figure 1). For example, people who are predisposed to be more benevolent could elicit more cooperative behavior from their partners, leading them to perceive their partners to use a more cooperative style, or they could project their own more cooperative conflict style onto others. Therefore, partner effects reflect the extent to which individual traits associate with a person's perceptions of others. Importantly, a dyadic approach also allows for a statistical analysis of interaction effects, which can help scholars ascertain whether one's own and one's partner's scores on these traits work alone or in concert to predict perceptions about conflict styles. If partner or interaction effects are found in this study, such findings would also demonstrate that knowing one individual's traits is not enough to predict conflict styles—instead the dual concern model should take into account both people's traits.

Traits Related to Argumentativeness and Verbal Aggressiveness

Numerous studies have focused on how argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness function within organizations (e.g., Avtgis & Chory, 2010; Infante & Gorden, 1985b), classrooms (e.g., Myers, 2002; Myers & Rittenour, 2010; Myers & Rocca, 2001), small groups (e.g., Anderson & Banerjee, 2010; Anderson & Martin, 1999), and interpersonal relationships (e.g., Avtgis & Rancer, 2010; Frantz & Seburn, 2003; Weger, 2006). In addition to being applicable to various contexts, these two constructs have cross-cultural relevancy (Avtgis, Rancer, Kanjeva, & Chory, 2008; Nicotera & Robinson, 2010). Being high in argumentativeness and low in verbal aggressiveness is the most constructive combination, whereas being low in argumentativeness and high in verbal aggressiveness is the most destructive combination (Infante & Gorden, 1985b). The argumentativeness skill deficiency model also suggests that people who lack skill in arguing are more likely to resort to physical and verbal aggression (Infante, Chandler, & Rudd, 1989; Roberto, 1999; Wigley, 2008).

Argumentativeness and Avoidance

People who possess the trait of argumentativeness enjoy arguing and are predisposed to take and defend their own positions as well as challenge the positions of others (Avtgis & Rancer, 2010; Infante & Rancer, 1982). Atkinson's value expectancy theory of achievement motivation (1957, 1966) is the theoretical underpinning for the argumentativeness model (Infante et al., 2011). This model suggests that people have two parallel motives: The motivation to succeed leads people to approach arguments and challenge others, whereas the motivation not to fail leads people to avoid arguments and retreat. Thus,

argumentativeness is rooted in cognitive approach–avoid processes and involves criteria-based decision making (Hample & Dallinger, 1987; Infante & Rancer, 1982; Rancer & Avtig, 2006). Argumentativeness has also been conceptualized as a form of assertiveness that can foster cooperation because it helps people solve problems (Infante, 1987; Infante & Wigley, 1986; Rancer & Avtig, 2006).

In line with the idea that argumentativeness involves being motivated to approach rather than avoid discussing contentious issues, the Argumentativeness Scale was originally developed to measure both approach and avoidance tendencies, with argumentative individuals presumed to be high in approach and low in avoidance (Infante & Rancer, 1982). Although the scale was composed of two dimensions, it was treated as if it was unidimensional. Other researchers have argued that it is better to conceptualize argumentativeness in terms of subdimensions (Blickle, 1995). In a study by Hamilton and Hample (2011), argumentativeness was positively associated with the tendency to approach arguments and negatively associated with the tendency to avoid arguments. Emotional involvement with arguing was positively correlated with *both* approach and avoidance tendencies, such that the overall pattern of findings casts argumentativeness and avoidance as two distinct yet related constructs. Thus, argumentativeness and avoidance are considered separate but related constructs in the present study. These two dimensions are also consistent with the conflict literature, which suggests that conflict behavior varies in terms of how passive versus assertive it is (van de Vliert & Euwema, 1994).

Verbal Aggressiveness and Verbal Benevolence

While argumentativeness and avoidance may, to some extent, reflect the assertive and passive tendencies that people display during conflict situations, verbal aggressiveness and its sister construct, verbal benevolence, may reflect competitive and cooperative tendencies, respectively. Verbally aggressive communicators are motivated to make themselves feel superior by derogating others; thus, the locus of attack is the other person's self-concept rather than her or his position on an issue (Infante & Rancer, 1982). Active forms of verbal aggressiveness include yelling, threats, character attacks, profanity, insults, sarcasm, and belittling (Avtgis & Rancer, 2010; Infante & Wigley, 1986; Neuman & Baron, 1997; Rancer & Avtig, 2006). Verbal aggressiveness has been associated with lower levels of satisfaction in superior–subordinate relationships (Infante, Anderson, Martin, Herrington, & Kim, 1993; Infante & Gorden, 1985a,b, 1991) and lower levels of subordinate influence with supervisors (Infante, 1987; Infante et al., 1993). As these findings suggest, verbal aggressiveness is a form of hostility that is destructive and uncooperative (Infante, 1987; Infante & Wigley, 1986).

However, when Infante and Wigley (1986) developed the Verbal Aggressiveness Scale (VAS), they included items related to verbal benevolence as well as items related to aggressiveness in an attempt to lessen the influence of social desirability biases. Infante et al. (2011) have maintained that this scale should be treated as unidimensional. Other scholars have argued that the VAS is two-dimensional—with one dimension assessing verbal aggressiveness and the other assessing verbal benevolence (e.g., Kotowski et al., 2009). Under this view, benevolence is more than "just a lack of aggression," and it is a distinct concept in its own right (Kotowski et al., 2009, p. 445). Hamilton and Hample (2011) demonstrated that verbal aggressiveness is positively associated with a subscale measuring verbal destructiveness and negatively associated with a subscale measuring verbal collaborativeness (similar to benevolence). Other studies have shown that the negative association between benevolence and reported use of aggressive behavior is stronger than the positive association between verbal aggressiveness and reported use of aggressive behavior (e.g., Chory-Assad, 2002; Kotowski et al., 2009) and that verbal benevolence is negatively correlated with argumentativeness (Kotowski et al., 2009). In many ways, the constructs of verbal aggressiveness and benevolence reflect findings in the conflict literature, which suggest that conflict styles differ in the degree to which they are competitive versus cooperative (Sillars, Canary & Tafoya, 2004; Thomas & Kilmann, 1978; van de Vliert & Euwema, 1994). Thus, in the present study, verbal aggressiveness and verbal benevolence are treated as related yet independent traits.

The Dual Concern Model of Conflict

The dual concern model of conflict expanded on three earlier systems for classifying conflict styles that all built upon one another: Blake and Mouton's (1964) managerial grid, Thomas and Kilmann's (1978) Conflict Management-of-Differences (MODE) Scale, and Rahim's (1983) measure of styles for handling interpersonal conflict. Shortly thereafter, Pruitt advanced the dual concern model of conflict negotiation (Pruitt & Carnevale, 1993; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986). In this model, five conflict styles—integrating, dominating, obliging, avoiding, and compromising—are characterized by various combinations of concern for oneself versus concern for others. Concern for self involves trying to reach one's own goals. High concern for self leads to more assertive behavior, whereas low concern for self leads to more passive behavior. Concern for others relates to how much one wants to help a partner reach her or his goals. High concern for others leads to cooperative behavior, whereas low concern for others leads to competitive behavior. The traits of avoidance and argumentativeness appear to reflect the passive versus assertive nature of conflict styles, and the traits of verbal aggressiveness versus benevolence appear to reflect the degree to which a conflict style is competitive or cooperative, as shown in Figure 2.

Indeed, these traits could constitute dimensions that help distinguish the five conflict styles in the dual concern model. However, this may be too simplistic because, as mentioned previously, the traits of verbal aggressiveness and benevolence, as well as argumentativeness and avoidance, are conceptualized as related yet independent constructs. This suggests that viewing conflict styles as situated in a grid defined by two dimensions may not provide a complete picture of how these traits are associated with conflict styles. Individuals can possess varying degrees of given traits, such as being high in argumentativeness, moderate in verbal aggressiveness, low in avoidance, and moderate in benevolence. The two-dimensional grid does not take this type of complexity into account. Nonetheless, past research provides some hints regarding how these traits may be related to conflict styles as well as how the traits of both disputants may interact in ways that are not accounted for in the dual concern model.

This research has relied mostly on pen-and-paper measures, such as hypothetical scenarios and self-report questionnaires. The two studies that have investigated how argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness are manifest in actual behaviors have produced mixed findings (e.g., Levine & Boster, 1996; Semic & Canary, 1997) and show that conflict behaviors are influenced by the combination of partners' scores on argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness rather than one individual's scores. Levine and Boster (1996) found that when individuals who were high and low in argumentativeness were paired, more arguments were generated. Semic and Canary found that the most arguments were generated when both partners were highly argumentative, and the fewest arguments were generated when both
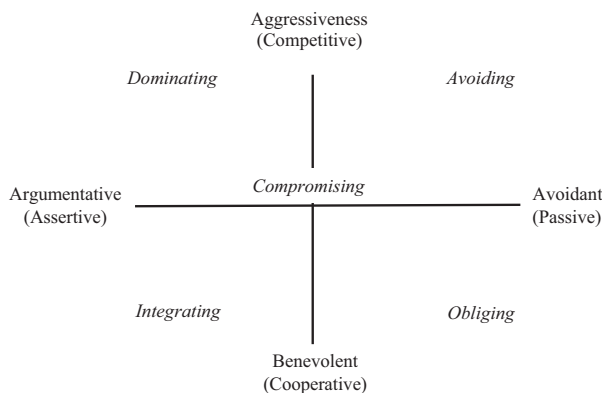

Figure 2. Traits of avoidance, argumentativeness, verbal aggressiveness, and verbal benevolence on the passive versus assertive nature of conflict styles.

partners were low in argumentativeness. To date, verbal benevolence and avoidance have rarely been studied alongside argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness to determine how they function to predict behavior (for an exception regarding benevolence, see Kotowski et al., 2009). All four aforementioned traits are included here to test how they are associated with perceptions that an individual used the five conflict styles in the dual concern model.

Integrating

The integrating style, which is cooperative and assertive, focuses on problem-solving in a collaborative fashion. Individuals with this style face conflict directly, try to find new and creative solutions by considering both people's needs, and work to keep the relationship intact for future interaction (Gross & Guerrero, 2000; Pruitt & Kim, 2004; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986; Thomas & Kilmann, 1974). Individuals characterized by verbal benevolence may be especially likely to utilize the integrating style. Validating one's partner keeps the lines of communication open so problem-solving can occur. Verbal aggressiveness is likely to have the opposite effect. Indeed, Rogan and La France (2003) demonstrated that trait aggressiveness is negatively associated with solution-oriented conflict strategies. People are also more likely to engage in problem-solving when their partner refrains from being verbally aggressive (Canary, Cupach, & Messman, 1995).

In most situations, argumentativeness is also likely to be associated with the integrating style. Individuals high in argumentativeness tend to be more facilitating and even-handed in situations where they have a strong personal preference for a particular outcome (Frantz & Seburn, 2003). However, there may be some situations where argumentativeness is not associated with the integrating style. At its core, argumentativeness involves a predisposition to advance one's own arguments and attack opposing positions, which may or may not be related to the use of more cooperative conflict strategies. In some cases, argumentativeness could be perceived as threatening, especially when people hold onto their positions and fail to listen to others, or when argumentativeness is coupled with verbal aggressiveness such that a person has a tendency to attack both positions and people. Thus, argumentativeness may be related to the integrating style, but only when used by someone who is benevolent and not verbally aggressive. The tendency to avoid arguments, however, is likely to be negatively related to the integrating style since problem-solving and finding new solutions is contingent upon direct communication. This reasoning leads to the first set of hypotheses:

H1: Perceptions that an individual used the integrating conflict style are (a) positively associated with actor and partner reports of benevolence, and (b) negatively associated with actor and partner reports of verbal aggressiveness and avoidance.

H2: Argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness interact such that people are perceived to use more of an integrating conflict style when both they and their partners are perceived to be high in argumentativeness and low in verbal aggressiveness.

H3: Argumentativeness and benevolence interact such that people are perceived to use more of an integrating conflict style when both they and their partners are perceived to be high in argumentativeness and high in benevolence.

Dominating

The dominating conflict style, which is assertive and uncooperative (Blake & Mouton, 1964), relies on the use of power, aggression, verbal dominance, and perseverance. People who use this style employ

tactics such as hostile questions or remarks, threats, antagonistic jokes or teasing, aggressive questioning, and confrontational remarks (Pruitt & Kim, 2004; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986; Thomas & Kilmann, 1974). Verbal aggressiveness should be associated positively with the dominating style. Ohbuchi and Fukushima (1997) showed that, in comparison with people low in verbal aggressiveness, those high in verbal aggressiveness tended to exhibit more hostile conflict behavior when their partner engaged in impolite tactics. Similarly, Rogan and La France (2003) found that people high in verbal aggressiveness tended to report having used the dominating style during a recent conflict with a friend. Although scholars have not yet tested the relationship between benevolence and the dominating style, given that benevolent individuals are predisposed to validate and support their partners, it seems unlikely they would use such a style.

Because argumentativeness is an assertive style, it would appear to be positively related to the dominating style. However, the degree to which argumentativeness is related to the dominating style may depend on the extent to which a person also possesses traits related to verbal aggressiveness and benevolence. Argumentative communication may be perceived as threatening and inappropriate when used as part of a larger offensive strategy that involves attacking both positions and people (Infante & Gorden, 1985a,b; Rancer & Avtig, 2006). Given that the dominating style focuses on arguing persistently for one's ideas or opinions without regard for the other person's position, argumentativeness may be associated with the dominating style when used alongside verbally aggressive tactics. However, if argumentative people are also predisposed to be benevolent, they should be unlikely to have a dominating conflict style. Therefore, we pose a hypothesis and research questions:

H4: Perceptions that an individual used the dominating conflict style are (a) positively associated with actor and partner reports of verbal aggressiveness, and (b) negatively associated with actor and partner reports of avoidance and benevolence.

R1: Are perceptions that an individual used the dominating style associated with actor or partner scores on argumentativeness?

R2: Does argumentativeness interact with either verbal aggressiveness or benevolence in relation to the dominating style?

Obliging

The obliging conflict style is passive and cooperative and involves putting another individual's needs before one's own interests (Blake & Mouton, 1964). Obliging focuses on expressing harmony by putting aside one's own needs to please a partner, passively accepting decisions a partner makes, yielding to one's partner, and denying or failing to express one's needs (Pruitt & Kim, 2004; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986; Thomas & Kilmann, 1974). Rogan and La France (2003) found a negative association between trait verbal aggressiveness and nonconfrontational strategies. Presumably, people high in verbal aggressiveness would have a difficult time allowing others to win an argument. Similarly, because argumentative individuals are predisposed to be direct and verbal, it seems unlikely that they would oblige. However, those who are high in benevolence may use the obliging style as a way to support and validate their partner, and those who are high in avoidance may use the obliging style as a way to end the conflict quickly. Certain traits may also interact to predict the extent to which a person is perceived to use the obliging style. In particular, when one person is high in argumentativeness or verbal aggressiveness and the other person is low in argumentativeness or high in benevolence, the latter individual may be more likely to give in. Thus, it follows that

H5: Perceptions that an individual used the obliging style are (a) negatively associated with actor reports of verbal aggressiveness and argumentativeness, and (b) positively associated with actor reports of benevolence and avoidance.

R3: Does actor argumentativeness or actor verbal aggressiveness interact with any of the partner conflict styles in relation to the obliging style?

Avoiding

The avoiding style involves removing oneself from conflict, either physically or psychologically (Pruitt & Kim, 2004; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986; Thomas & Kilmann, 1974). Traditionally, the avoiding style has been conceptualized as passive and uncooperative because there is a lack of concern for either person's goals. However, there are times when an avoiding style is not only acceptable but preferable and even cooperative (Dailey & Palomares, 2004; Roloff & Ifert, 2000), such as when avoidance prevents people from becoming overly emotional or aggressive, when people are not very invested in the outcome, and when people decide to "agree to disagree."

Obviously, people who possess an avoidance orientation toward arguing should be more likely to report engaging in this conflict style. It is yet unknown, however, whether predispositions toward argumentativeness, verbal aggressiveness, or benevolence are related to perceptions that a person uses the avoiding style. Research on topic avoidance (e.g., the strategic avoidance of certain topics) suggests that different types of avoidant communication vary in terms of how direct and rude they are perceived to be (Dailey & Palomares, 2004). For example, leaving the room or putting a hand over a partner's mouth to avoid talking about an issue is perceived as direct and rude, whereas complimenting or hugging the partner as a diversionary tactic is perceived as more indirect and polite (Dailey & Palomares, 2004). When choosing an avoidance strategy, verbally aggressive individuals may be more likely to employ strategies that are rude, whereas benevolent individuals may be more likely to employ strategies that are nice, yet both may be trying to avoid the topic. Similarly, Wang, Fink, and Cai (2012) found that avoidance has two foci: competitive goals (communicative avoidant strategies such as withdrawal, passive competition, exit, and outflanking) and cooperative goals (issue avoidant strategies like pretending and yielding). Thus, in contrast to earlier conceptualizations of avoidance as a passive and uncooperative strategy, scholars now recognize that avoidance can serve a variety of functions and can be an adaptive response to the negative features of confrontation and conflict (Roloff & Wright, 2009), leading us to pose the following:

H6: Perceptions that an individual used the avoiding style are positively associated with actor reports of avoidance.

R4: Are perceptions that an individual used the avoiding style associated with actor or partner reports of (a) argumentativeness, (b) verbal aggressiveness, or (c) benevolence?

Compromising

Finally, the compromising style involves searching for an intermediate position through strategies such as splitting the difference or meeting each other half-way (Pruitt & Kim, 2004; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986; Thomas & Kilmann, 1974) and, as such, has been theorized to reflect moderate concern for one's own goals as well as one's partner's goals (Rahim, 1983, 1986). However, empirical research has shown that compromising is more similar to integrating and yielding than avoiding or dominating and is therefore a

cooperative style that reflects high concern for others and moderate concern for self (van de Vliert & Prein, 1989). Some scholars (e.g., Pruitt & Rubin, 1986; van de Vliert & Kabanoff, 1990) have dismissed compromising as a watered-down version of the integrating strategy, whereas others (e.g., La Valley & Guerrero, 2012; Rahim, 1986; Thomas & Kilmann, 1974) see compromising as backup strategy when other conflict approaches, including integrating, fail. Given that scholars have different opinions regarding how the compromising style is related to the other four styles in the dual concern model, and given that this style occupies the center of the grid (see Figure 2), a research question is posed:

R5: Are perceptions that an individual used the compromising style associated with actor or partner reports of (a) argumentativeness, (b) verbal aggressiveness, or (c) benevolence or (d) avoidance?

Method

Participants

Undergraduate students ($N = 200$) enrolled in business courses at a large university in the southwestern United States volunteered to participate in exchange for extra credit in one of their courses. The median age was 21 (mean = 23, range = 18–58). Most participants ($n = 167$) identified themselves as White, followed by Mexican or Latin American ($n = 17$), Asian American ($n = 7$), African American ($n = 6$), and Native American or Alaskan ($n = 3$). Most of the participants were currently working part time ($n = 128$) or full time ($n = 44$) in a paid position. Another 16 participants were currently working as interns. Nearly all participants (98%) reported having work experience, with many describing their jobs as related to retail or management.

Procedures

Participants reported to a research site at an assigned time. Two participants who did not know one another were assigned to each time slot and were instructed to sit apart and independently complete a set of initial questionnaires asking them about their own levels of argumentativeness, avoidance, verbal aggressiveness, and benevolence. After completing these questionnaires, participants were randomly paired into 100 dyads (25 female dyads, 25 male dyads, and 50 opposite-sex dyads).

After being assigned to a dyad, participants were told that they would engage in a role-playing activity that involved making a joint decision about which two of four retail employees should be terminated during an organizational downsizing. Each of the four employees was described as having an equal mix of positive and negative characteristics. This activity required each dyad to make a decision that both partners would agree to implement, as well as to write and sign a memo detailing the reasons behind their joint decision. Each partner was given private information related to which two employees might be best to keep and best to terminate based on their overall goals and motivations for the company. Within this private information, different people were described as best to terminate so that partners would, at least initially, be likely to disagree regarding who should be let go. Dyads were given 50 minutes to complete this activity, after which they independently completed questionnaires regarding their partner's conflict style.

Measures

The Argumentativeness Scale
Participants completed the original 20-item Argumentativeness Scale (Infante & Rancer, 1982). Endpoints were 1 = *almost never true for you* and 5 = *almost always true for you*. The 10 items representing an approach orientation included "I have a pleasant, good feeling when I win a point in an argument,"

and "I enjoy defending my point of view on an issue." The ten items representing an avoidant orientation included "Arguing with a person creates more problems for me than it solves" and "I find myself unable to think of effective points during an argument."

To confirm that argumentativeness and avoidance are distinguishable factors, a two-factor model was tested by means of confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using the maximum likelihood method. This model included latent variables for argumentativeness and avoidance, with nine items as indicators for each latent variable. (The two items representing ability to argue were excluded as recommended by Hamilton & Hample, 2011). This model was not a good fit to the data (CFI = .788). However, the model improved significantly when items with low factor loadings (<.50) were removed, leaving seven items loading on argumentativeness and four items loading on avoidance, $\chi^2(43) = 111.57$, $p > .001$; $\chi^2/df = 2.60$; CFI = .951; RMSEA = .071 (range = .052–.108). Factor loadings ranged from .61 to .78 for the argumentativeness items and .60 to .75 for the avoidance items. The latent variables representing argumentativeness and avoidance were negatively correlated, $r = -.23$, $p < .001$. Thus, argumentativeness was measured with seven items ($\alpha = .88$) and avoidance ($\alpha = .78$) was measured with four items, as indicated in the model. Items were averaged to create each scale.[1]

The Verbal Aggressiveness Scale

Participants also completed Infante and Wigley's (1986) 20-item VAS. Endpoints were 1 = *almost never true* and 5 = *almost always true*. The ten negatively worded items included "When people simply will not budge on a matter of importance I lose my temper and say rather strong things to them" and "When individuals insult me, I get a lot of pleasure out of really telling them off." The ten positively worded items included "When I try to influence people, I make a great effort not to offend them" and "I refuse to participate in arguments when they involve personal attacks."

A two-factor model was constructed, with latent variables for verbal aggressiveness and benevolence. The ten negative items served as indicators of verbal aggressiveness, whereas the ten positive items served as indicators of benevolence. The initial CFA showed that two items associated with benevolence had low factor loadings, so these items were dropped and the model was rerun. The second model showed a reasonably good fit to the data, $\chi^2(135) = 390.06$, $p > .001$; $\chi^2/df = 2.89$; CFI = .931; RMSEA = .082 (range = .068–.112), especially considering the number of parameters being estimated. Factor loadings ranged from .60 to .87 for the verbal aggressiveness items and .68 to .90 for the benevolence items.[2] Verbal aggressiveness ($\alpha = .85$) and verbal benevolence ($\alpha = .81$) were measured using the items from this model. The correlation between verbal aggressiveness and benevolence was $r = -.19$, $p < .01$. Table 1 includes the correlations among the all the variables of interest in this study.

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[1]To ensure that it was appropriate to treat the items from the Argumentative Scale as representing two scales measuring argumentativeness and avoidance, two other models were tested—a one-factor model that included all items from the original scale and a one-factor model that excluded items that other researchers have suggested dropping. The one-factor model that included all 20 items from the original Argumentativeness Scale (with the ten avoidant items reverse-coded) was a poor fit to the data (CFI = .446), as was a one-factor model that excluded the two items that Hamilton and Hample (2011) identified as measuring ability to argue rather than approach or avoidant tendencies (CFI = .481). Next, items that had low factor loadings (i.e., standardized coefficients less than .50) were dropped from the model. This procedure left seven items representing argumentative tendencies and two avoidant items that were reverse-coded. Although this new unidimensional model was a better fit than the previous two models, $\chi^2(27) = 106.54$, $p > .001$; $\chi^2/df = 3.94$; CFI = .86; RMSEA = .122 (range = .098–.146), it was not a particularly good fit.

[2]The items from the Verbal Aggressiveness Scale were also tested using a one-factor model. The ten positively worded items were reverse-coded, and then, all 20 items were entered as indicators of verbal aggressiveness. This model was a poor fit to the data (CRI = .456), with only two of the reverse-coded items producing factor loadings that were significant at the .05 level. The other eight reverse-coded items were then deleted, and the model was rerun as a unidimensional model. Even after the deletion of these items, the model was not a good fit to the data, $\chi^2(54) = 357.92$, $p > .001$; $\chi^2/df = 6.63$; CFI = .769; RMSEA = .168 (range = .152–.185).

Table 1
Correlations Among Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Actor verbal aggressiveness	—											
2. Partner verbal aggressiveness	.07	—										
3. Actor argumentativeness	-.02	-.01	—									
4. Partner argumentativeness	-.03	.02	.01	—								
5. Actor benevolence	-.14	-.05	.07	.06	—							
6. Partner benevolence	.02	-.11	.03	.10	.19*	—						
7. Actor avoidance	.18*	.07	-.26***	.19**	.09	.01	—					
8. Partner avoidance	.13	.03	.11	-.04	.02	.08	.20*	—				
9. Integrating style	-.22**	-.04	.09	.01	.14	.10	-.33**	-.13	—			
10. Dominating style	.27***	.01	-.07	.11	-.08	-.38***	.19**	.08	-.26***	—		
11. Obliging style	-.11	.01	.08	-.05	.03	.04	.28***	-.05	.41***	-.05	—	
12. Avoiding style	.04	.02	-.05	-.31***	.04	-.06	.38***	.04	-.19**	-.03	.31***	—
13. Compromising style	-.17*	.01	.03	.06	.10	.08	-.28***	-.22**	.57***	.08	.33***	-.19***

Note. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001, two-tailed. Each individual completed the trait measures for themselves and rated their partner in terms of the conflict style they exhibited during the interaction.

Perceptions of the Partner's Conflict Behavior

Participants rated their partner's behavior during the activity using a modified version of Form C (peer–peer) of the Rahim Organizational Conflict Instrument (ROCI-II) that was adapted to apply to perceptions of a partner's behavior. Five items measured each conflict style. Scoring for the ROCI-II followed the procedures developed by Rahim, with higher scores indicating that people were perceived as using more of a particular conflict style. The following α coefficients were found for each of the subscales: Integrating = .88 (e.g., "My partner collaborated with me to come up with decisions that were acceptable to both of us"); avoiding = .83 (e.g., "My partner avoided having an open discussion with me about our differences in opinion"); dominating = .80 (e.g., "My partner was firm in telling me what s/he wanted to do"); obliging = .83 (e.g., "My partner gave into my wishes"); and compromising = .79 (e.g., "My partner negotiated with me so a compromise could be reached").

Results

Actor–partner interdependence models, which were estimated by means of multilevel modeling using the maximum likelihood method, were used to test the hypotheses and research questions (Kashy & Kenny, 2000; Kenny, 1996). Multilevel modeling is a regression technique that is applied to hierarchically organized data, such as employees nested within organizations or individuals nested within dyads. Within a dyadic analysis, the analysis combines the effects of variables at the individual and dyadic levels into a single model while accounting for the interdependence between individuals at the dyadic level. Each model initially included eight main effects (actor and partner effects for each of the four traits), the sex (male or female) of each participant, and any hypothesized two-way interactions. As recommended by Kenny, Kashy, and Cook (2006), variables were centered. After an initial run, models were re-parameterized to include only the significant predictor variables. Sex did not emerge as a significant predictor in any of the models.

Integrating

For the model predicting perceptions of the integrating style, only actor effects were significant (see Table 2). Consistent with H1, people were more likely to be perceived by their partner as using the integrating style to the extent that they scored high in benevolence, low in verbal aggressiveness, and low in avoidance. In addition, the higher people scored in argumentativeness, the more likely they were to be rated by their partner as using the integrating style. However, this main effect was qualified by two significant two-way interactions that were interpreted via comparisons of simple slopes (Aiken & West, 1991). First, an actor argumentativeness by actor verbal aggressiveness interaction partially supported H2 by showing that individuals who were low in verbal aggressiveness and high in argumentativeness were perceived by their partners as using relatively high levels of the integrating style (see Figure 3). Second, consistent with H3, a significant interaction emerged showing that when actors rated themselves as high in both benevolence and argumentativeness their partners were especially likely to perceive them to use the integrating style (see Figure 4).

Dominating

The model for the dominating style provided partial support for H4 (see Table 2). As hypothesized, the higher individuals scored in verbal aggressiveness, the more likely they were to be perceived by their partners as using the dominating style (an actor effect). In relation to R1, individuals were less likely to be perceived as using the dominating style if they had a partner who was high in argumentativeness or benevolence (partner effects). Finally, relevant to R2, there were also two significant interaction effects. First, highly argumentative individuals were especially likely to be judged as dominant by partners who

Table 2

Summary of APIM Analyses for Partner Perceptions of an Individual's Conflict Style

Dependent variable	Predictor variables	ß	t
Integrating style	Actor verbal aggressiveness	−.34	−2.89**
	Actor avoidance	−.18	−2.20*
	Actor benevolence	.44	5.71***
	Actor argumentativeness	.22	2.09*
	Actor VA by actor ARG	−.34	2.21*
	Actor BEN by actor ARG	.22	2.28*
Dominating style	Actor verbal aggressiveness	.64	4.04***
	Partner benevolence	−.35	−2.31*
	Partner argumentativeness	−.34	−2.28*
	Partner BEN by actor ARG	.15	3.74***
	Partner ARG by actor VA	−.32	−2.12*
Obliging style	Actor argumentativeness	−.31	−2.58**
	Actor ARG by partner ARG	−.33	−2.30*
Avoiding style	Actor avoidance	.20	2.11*
	Actor argumentativeness	−.36	−2.63**
	Partner argumentativeness	−.33	−2.35*
Compromising style	Actor avoidance	−.22	−2.21*
	Actor verbal aggressiveness	−.31	−2.71**

Note. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001. N = 100 dyads. Degrees of freedom in the numerator were 1 for all tests. Degrees of freedom in the denominator ranged from 93.12 to 97.12.
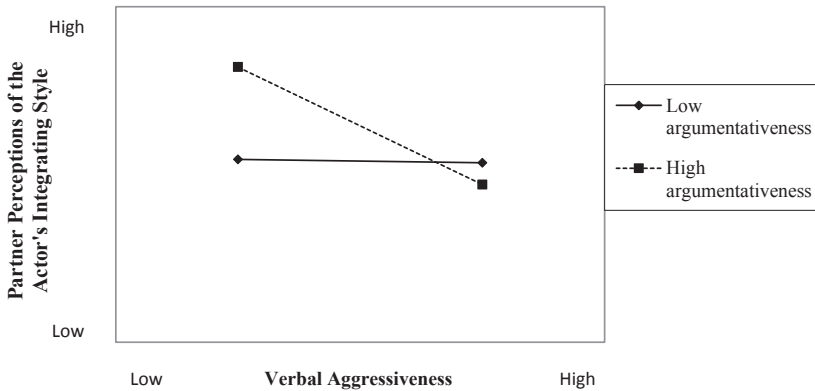

Figure 3. Actor argumentativeness by actor verbal aggressiveness interaction on partner perceptions of the integrating style.

were low rather than high in benevolence (see Figure 5). Second, people were also likely to be rated as dominant if they were high in verbal aggressiveness and their partner was low in argumentativeness (see Figure 6).

Obliging

Only two significant findings surfaced for the obliging style. First, as predicted, the higher people scored on argumentativeness, the less likely they were to be perceived as obliging. Second, a significant interaction emerged, which, relevant to R3, showed that individuals low in argumentativeness were especially likely to be perceived as using the obliging style if their partner was high in argumentativeness (see Figure 7).
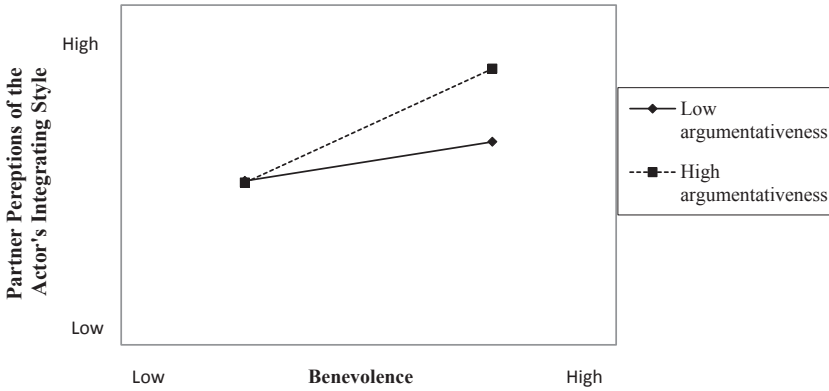
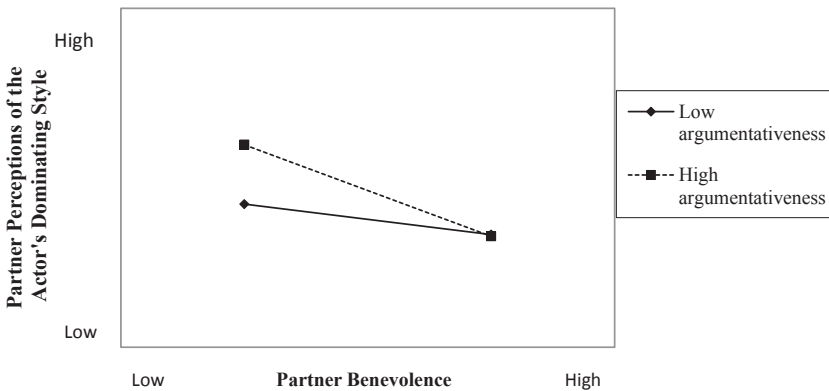*Figure 4.* Actor argumentativeness by actor benevolence interaction on partner perceptions of the integrating style.

Figure 5. Actor argumentativeness by partner benevolence interaction on partner perceptions of the dominating style.
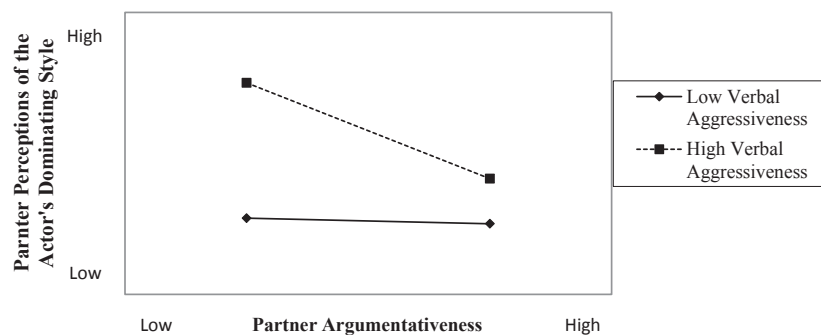

Figure 6. Actor verbal aggressiveness by partner argumentativeness interaction on partner perceptions of the dominating style.

Avoiding

H6 was supported; individuals were more likely to be perceived as using the avoiding style to the extent that they had scored high on the trait measure of avoidance. Two findings emerged in response to R4;
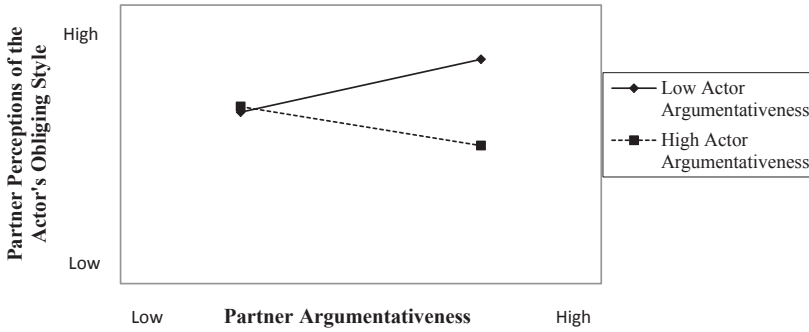
Figure 7. Actor argumentativeness by partner argumentativeness interaction on partner perceptions of the obliging style.

individuals were *less* likely to be perceived as using the avoiding style when either they or their partners had rated themselves as high in argumentativeness.

Compromising

R5 addressed whether any of the traits would be associated with the compromising style. Only two of eight potential associations relevant to this question were significant. Specifically, individuals were more likely to be perceived by their partners as using the compromising style to the extent that they had rated themselves as low in avoidance or verbal aggressiveness.

Discussion

The present study's findings contribute to two important areas of research and scholarly debate. First, presumably the four traits examined in this study were observable within conflict interaction since people's conflict styles were perceived differently based on the traits they reported possessing. Therefore, these traits should be considered behavioral predispositions rather than attitudes, motivations, or self-concept constructs. Several findings emerged linking these traits to perceptions of conflict styles. Importantly, these associations were not derived from self-reports of one's own traits and conflict styles but rather represent associations between a person's self-reported traits and a partner's perceptions of that person's conflict style (actor effects) or associations between a person's self-reported traits and perceptions of a partner's conflict style (partner effects). Moreover, these associations emerged within interaction between strangers who had no knowledge of one another's typical communication patterns. Thus, these associations, and in particular the actor effects, suggest that the traits of argumentativeness, avoidance, verbal aggressiveness, and benevolence are somehow manifest to a partner in an observable way during interaction.

Second, the four traits examined herein help distinguish the conflict styles in the dual concern model since each style has a different profile of traits associated with it. Moreover, conflict styles appear to be influenced to some extent by the partner's identification with these traits. This is important because it shows that traits help shape how people are perceived to handle conflict. However, the effect sizes were fairly small, which also suggests that conflict styles are malleable and vary depending on the situation (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986). Importantly, the results from the present study suggest that the four traits do not always predict perceptions of conflict styles in the ways predicted by the dual concern model (see Figure 2). Indeed, some actor effects supported the model, whereas others did not. In addition, partner and interaction effects emerged, which demonstrate the importance of looking at conflict styles within the context of interaction between two people rather than just one person's concerns for self and others. The specific findings that lend support to these arguments are discussed next.

Traits Related to Perceptions of the Integrating Style

Participants were likely to be perceived as using the integrating style to the extent that they scored high on benevolence but low on verbal aggressiveness and avoidance. There was also a small positive association between argumentativeness and perceptions that a person used the integrating style. This association, however, may depend on how verbally aggressive or benevolent an individual is. Specifically, highly argumentative individuals were most likely to be judged by their partners as using the integrating style if they were also low in verbal aggressiveness or high in benevolence. These findings make theoretical sense and are largely consistent with predictions from the dual concern model (see Figure 2). The trait of argumentativeness focuses on one's skill and enjoyment in advocating a position—but it does not include skills related to acknowledging and validating the other person's positions. Such acknowledgment is necessary if a truly integrative solution is to emerge. Therefore, it is not surprising that individuals who are high in both argumentativeness and benevolence are especially likely to be perceived as employing an integrative conflict style.

Inspection of the interaction means plotted in Figures 3 and 4 suggests that being high in argumentativeness is only related to heightened perceptions that a person used the integrating style if that person is also high in benevolence or low in verbal aggressiveness. These results are conceptually important because researchers have cast argumentativeness as a positive or cooperative trait (Gorden, Infante, & Graham, 1988; Gorden, Infante, & Izzo, 1988; Infante, 1987; Infante & Gorden, 1985a, b, 1987, 1989; Onyekwere, Rubin, & Infante, 1991) rather than considering that the communication connected to this trait might be perceived as more or less cooperative depending on what other traits a person possesses.

Traits Related to Perceptions of the Dominating Style

A somewhat different yet complementary pattern emerged for the dominating style. For the integrating style, all of the significant findings reflected actor effects or the extent to which one person's score on a given trait associated with another individual's perception of that person's conflict style. For perceptions of the dominating style, a mix of actor and partner effects surfaced. There was an actor effect such that people were perceived as more dominant to the extent that they had rated themselves as verbally aggressive. Surprisingly, this was the only actor effect. This is inconsistent with the dual concern model as presented in Figure 2, which suggests that those perceived as high in the dominating style would possess verbal aggressiveness (representing uncooperativeness) and argumentativeness (representing assertiveness).

There were also partner effects for benevolence and argumentativeness; people who were high in either of these traits tended to rate their partner as less dominating. There are several possible explanations for these partner effects. First, people who are high in benevolence and argumentativeness might elicit more cooperation from their partners by injecting positivity into the discussion and keeping negativity from escalating. Second, individuals may project some of their own conflict style onto their partner. So an individual who is high in argumentativeness may interpret a partner's behavior as more focused on positions than it actually is. Third, individuals high in argumentativeness might not perceive as much aggression because they enjoy rather than avoid conflict and, therefore, see dominating behavior as less threatening than would someone who is low in argumentativeness. Finally, individuals who are high in argumentativeness or benevolence may be more effective at managing conflict. Thus, disputes might be settled more quickly and equitably, leading to less need for the partner to use dominant behavior. Regardless of the explanation, these effects suggest that the partner with whom one interacts may be as important as individual traits when predicting conflict styles.

Two actor-by-partner interactions also emerged for perceptions of the dominating style. The first of these interactions showed that the degree to which highly argumentative individuals are perceived to use the dominating style is contingent, at least in part, on the extent to which their partner is predisposed

toward benevolence. Highly argumentative individuals were perceived to be especially dominant by partners who were low rather than high in benevolence. Why might this be the case? An individual who is low in benevolence is unlikely to agree with or validate a partner's arguments, which may compel a highly argumentative individual to become more forceful in advancing her or his arguments. The other interaction effect showed that people who were high in verbal aggressiveness were especially likely to be perceived as dominating if their partners had rated themselves as low in argumentativeness. This finding makes sense. If one partner is high in verbal aggressiveness and the other partner is low in argumentativeness, the partner who is low in argumentativeness is likely to feel like he or she is being dominated. These interactions are important because they give credence to the idea that the communication between two people can influence how one's conflict style is judged. Thus, traits alone are not enough to predict perceptions of conflict behavior.

Traits Related to Perceptions of the Obliging, Avoiding, and Compromising Styles

While some of the findings connected to the integrating and dominating styles can be linked to the fact that the traits of benevolence and verbal aggressiveness are cooperative versus uncooperative, respectively, some of the findings connected to the obliging and avoiding styles can be traced to the passive versus assertive dimension that underlies conflict styles. Specifically, when people rated themselves as highly argumentative, their partners were unlikely to perceive that they used either the obliging or the avoiding style. This is to be expected since Rahim (1983) cast both the obliging and the avoiding styles as showing low concern for one's own needs and, thus, a lack of motivation to directly confront issues. Scoring high in avoidance, on the other hand, was associated with being perceived to use more of the avoiding style and less of the compromising style, presumably because these two styles are indirect versus direct, respectively.

However, the actor effects found in the present study did not fully support the dual concern model and, indeed, challenge it to some extent. According to the dual concern model (see Figure 2), obliging should be positively related to benevolence and avoidance. Instead, the only actor effect that emerged was that obliging was negatively related to argumentativeness. Thus, obliging may be less a function of trying to avoid an argument and more a function of not having skills in argumentation. An interaction also revealed that participants were *most* likely to perceive their partner as using the obliging style when they were high in argumentativeness and their partner was low in argumentativeness and *least* likely to perceive their partner as using the obliging style when both they and their partner were high in argumentativeness (see Figure 7). Because obliging is related to giving in rather than arguing for one's position, the present study's findings can be compared to previous findings by Semic and Canary (1997), who examined how the combination of partner scores on argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness affects the number of arguments generated. In Semic and Canary's study, the most arguments were generated when both partners were high in argumentativeness. Similarly, in the present study, participants reported that their partners used the least obliging when both individuals in the dyad had reported being high in argumentativeness. By extension, this finding suggests that partners were perceived by each other to engage in rather than avoid argument when they had both reported high levels of argumentativeness.

The results for avoiding followed a somewhat similar pattern in that there were both actor and partner effects for argumentativeness. In other words, participants were less likely to perceive a partner as using the avoiding style if either they or their partner had reported being high in argumentativeness. These findings are inconsistent with predictions from the dual concern model, which suggests that the avoiding style should be related to high levels of avoidance and high levels of verbal aggressiveness. Instead, avoiding seems to be a function of both partners not having skills in arguing. Aggressiveness or uncooperativeness may not necessarily be related to avoiding; rather avoiding may be a more neutral style (Semic & Canary, 1997) that occurs when people do not enjoy arguing with one another.

Finally, the model testing perceptions of compromising only produced two significant findings—participants who reported being high in verbal aggressiveness or avoidance were unlikely to be rated by their partners as compromising. The former finding comports with the idea that people high in verbal aggressiveness are uncooperative and do not want to sacrifice any of their goals. The latter finding is consistent with the idea that compromising requires negotiation and direct discussion, which an avoidant individual would be unlikely to engage in. It is also interesting that more findings emerged in relation to the integrating style than the compromising style. To achieve a truly integrative solution, partners must work together to find new creative ways to meet both of their goals. The implementation of such a sophisticated strategy may be more contingent on the combination of traits that a person possesses than is the compromising style, which requires less creativity.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study suggests that the four traits examined herein are associated with partner perceptions of conflict behavior and, therefore, are observable to partners. However, this study is limited because it does not determine *what* behaviors participants recalled when making their judgments. Therefore, scholars have yet to determine *how* these traits are manifest in observable behavior. Examining the various forms of verbal and nonverbal behavior that people engage in during conflict situations, and then ascertaining whether any of these behaviors are associated with the four traits studied herein, is a potentially important direction for future research.

Future research is also needed given that Kotowski et al. (2009) found no evidence that the traits of argumentativeness, verbal aggressiveness, and benevolence are associated with actual behavior. In their study, coders watched videotaped interactions and judged the degree to which interactants displayed behaviors that exemplified these traits. The coder ratings were not significantly correlated with the interactants' self-reports of the traits.

There are at least two differences between the present study and Kotowski et al.'s (2009) study that could help explain why their findings were different than the present study's findings. First, in Kotowski et al.'s study, observers coded behaviors from videotapes of 10-minute conversations. In the present study, participants engaged in a joint decision-making task that lasted for almost an hour and culminated with both partners signing their names to a memo detailing the rationale for their joint decision. Thus, the opportunity for active engagement, interaction, and behavioral displays was likely greater in the current study. Second, Kotowski et al. (2009) relied on self-reports and coder observations of individuals, whereas the present study utilized dyadic data to tap into partners' perceptions of one another. Both methods are valid for examining the connections between traits and behavior; however, they may not yield the same results. Observers and participants may notice different behaviors or interpret the same behaviors differently. Moreover, the coders in Kotowski's study only looked for behaviors that were directly related to verbal aggressiveness, argumentativeness, and benevolence, whereas participants in the present study were asked about their perceptions of more general conflict styles. Perhaps the traits studied herein are related to subtle behaviors that participants (compared to observers) are more likely to notice and interpret as consistent with various conflict styles.

The present study is limited in several other ways that provide direction for future research. For example, the current study's sample consisted of undergraduate university students role-playing during a simulated downsizing activity. Results may have been different with a more diverse sample or with actual employees involved in a real downsizing situation. In addition, the downsizing task itself may have affected the results. People were given reasons to favor certain employees so that they started out with different positions. This may have affected the conflict strategies they used. Partners were also focused on a task rather than on personal issues. Johnson, Backer, Wigley, Haigh, and Craig (2007) found that people tend to use more verbal aggression when arguing over personal issues, so becoming verbally hostile

may be somewhat unexpected in work-related contexts. If this is the case, the present study's findings for verbal aggressiveness might have been stronger if the context had been personal. The time limit, and the need to make a decision and write a rationale for that decision, may also have affected strategy usage, perhaps making people more likely to compromise or use the integrative style.

Despite these limitations, this study produced findings suggesting that the traits of argumentativeness, avoidance, benevolence, and verbal aggressiveness are somehow observable in communication and that they help differentiate the five conflict styles in the dual concern model. Perhaps just as importantly, this study showed that one person's self-reports of her or his own levels of argumentativeness, avoidance, benevolence, and verbal aggressiveness predicted how another person perceived her or him to act during a downsizing activity. This demonstrates that these four traits have real consequences for social interaction and, thus, deserve scholarly attention. Determining the specific behaviors that associate with these traits would be another important step in this program of research.

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